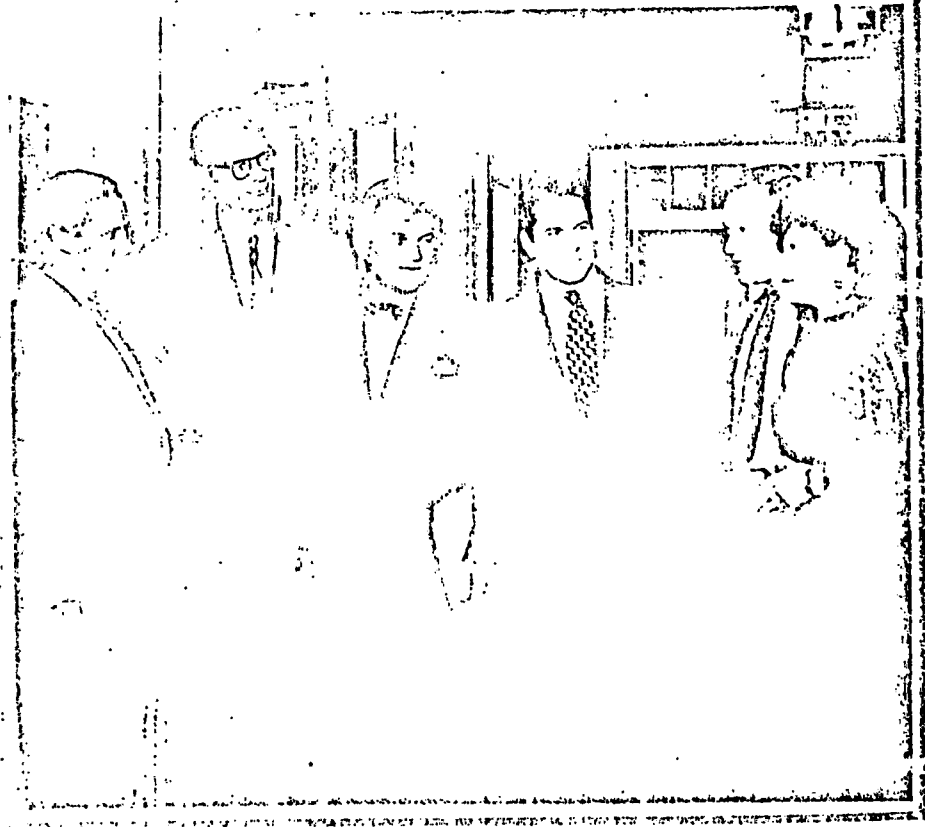


# POETRY AND FILM




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DYLAN THOMAS

ARTHUR MILLER

PARKER TYLER

LEWIS JACOBS

AMOS VOGEL

GIDEON BACHMAN

MAYA DEREN

IAN HUGO

WILLARD MAAS

GOTHAM BOOK MART

1972

# POETRY AND THE FILM: A SYMPOSIUM

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WITH MAYA DEREN, ARTHUR  
MILLER, DYLAN THOMAS,  
PARKER TYLER. CHAIRMAN,  
WILLARD MAAS. ORGANIZED  
BY AMOS VOGEL

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[On October 28, 1953, Cinema 16 held two sessions of a symposium with Maya Deren, Parker Tyler, Dylan Thomas, and Arthur Miller. Willard Maas acted as chairman. The following excerpts make up about one half of the symposium. Ideas repeated for the second audience and personal introductions of the panel make up, for the most part, the missing half.]

*Maas:* In a prepanel discussion earlier this week with the majority of the panel, we decided that maybe the best way to start this discussion would be to try to have the members of the panel outline . . . some of the basic aesthetic principles of the poetic film; and, therefore, I think I would like to call on Mr. Tyler first. . . .

*Tyler:* Thank you. My thought was that the question, rather than the assumption, by which the symposium will proceed tonight is that of what poetry, in and outside the film, actually is. Perhaps it would be necessary, for such a demonstration, to conceive the question at the start, and honestly, as faced with the two horns of a dilemma. Now that dilemma is: On the one hand, there's the *theory*

of poetry, its possibilities as such in the film medium, and on the other hand the *practice* of poetry, as concentrated in the avant-garde film. It should be hoped that we don't snag on either of these but will steer a just course between them. Now I thought we might get an over-all picture of the field to be surveyed, and to that end I'd like to give you a memorandum, so to speak, of the types of poetical expression that do appear in films today; that is, these expressions may be whole or fragmentary, they may be pure or impure, but at least they exist, and they are to be recognized as such. Now, poetical expression falls rather automatically into two groups: that is, poetry as a visual medium and poetry as a verbal medium, or, in a larger sense, as auditory, and that would, of course, include music. We might well begin with some of the shorter films that concentrate on poetry as a visual medium, and this, of course, leads right to Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet*, and to Buñuel-Dali's *Andalusian Dog*, and to Watson's *Lot in Sodom*. All these are classics now, and they emphasized a surrealist poetry of the image and gave rise to schools and styles of avant-garde all over the world. Cinema 16 patrons are familiar with some of these outstanding works—those of Maya Deren, of James Broughton, of Kenneth Anger, of Curtis Harrington. All these film-makers concentrated on what might be called pure cinema—entirely without words as a rule, although sometimes with music. Then to go back (after all, the avant-garde movement in poetry in America goes rather far back, at least to the 1920's) I know there was a type of film which got the name of cine-poem, and these films were impressionistic, but they concentrated on pictorial conceptions of city life, of nature, and, importantly, they stressed abstract patterns. Then, of course, there's the poetry of painting in motion—the pure abstract film—which also has a considerable history (there are Norman McLaren, the Whitney brothers, and many others). Then, also as a candidate in this list (perhaps disputable, but at any rate certainly worth mentioning), a school of naturalistic poetry of which Robert Flaherty was the pioneer. And we presume that his films can be considered integral without the commentary. And, finally, I would include the dream and hallucination sequences, with sound effects sometimes, that appear in commercial films.

Now poetry as a visual-verbal medium: We have the fantasy films of Jean Vigo (these films are primarily visual); and we have the avant-garde films that are set to poems or to poetic prose (those of Sidney Peterson, of Willard Maas, of Ian Hugo); then there's what I would term the "severe formalism" of Sergei Eisenstein, whose

montage borders on pure poetry. There are, of course, the Cocteau myth films: *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Eternal Return*, and *Orpheus*. And we might also include a special class of naturalistic poetry documents, such as *The River* and *The Blood of the Beasts* . . . of course they had commentary. And, then, to conclude, the fifty-fifty fusion; that is, Shakespeare's plays, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and the numerous operas that have been filmed. Now these are, admittedly, only the main leads of a very broad field, indeed. Many definitions are required in order to isolate the poetic content and the poetic potentialities in these various manifestations . . . Above all, there's the indications of value that have to be made. I'm sure that the members of the panel, including myself, have a number of significant distinctions and perhaps even more important opinions on these aspects.

Maas: Well, Miss Deren, will you take over from there?

Deren: I'm going to do something I think is a bit risky, and that is to go a little bit into the question of what is poetry, and what distinguishes what we would call poetry from anything else, because I think that only if we can get this straight, can we sensibly discuss poetry in film, or the poetic film, or anything else. Now I say that it's risky, because this is a subject that has been discussed for many, many centuries, and it's been very difficult to pin down. But the reason I'm going into it is not because I think distinctions are important as formulae and as rigidities, but I think they're important in the sense that they give an audience, or any *potential* audience, a preparation, an approach, to what they're going to see. In the sense that if they're thinking they are going to see an adventure film, and if they are confronted with a poetic film, that's not going to go very well. I don't think one is always predisposed toward poetry; the whole notion of distinguishing and, if you will, labeling things is not a matter of defining them so much as a matter of giving a clue to the frame of mind you bring to them. In other words, what are you going to be watching as this unrolls? What are you going to be listening for? If you're watching for *what* happens, you might not get the point of some of the retardations because they're concerned with *how* it happens. Now poetry, to my mind, consists not of assonance; or rhythm, or rhyme, or any of these other qualities we associate as being characteristic of poetry. Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to experience, in the sense that a poet is looking at the same experience that a dramatist may be looking at. It comes out differently because they are looking at it from a different point of view and because they are concerned with

different elements in it. Now, the characteristics of poetry, such as rhyme, or color, or any of those emotional qualities which we attach to the poetic work, also may be present in works which are not poetry, and this will confuse us. The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by "a poetic structure"), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a "vertical" investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means. A poem, to my mind, creates visible or auditory forms for something that is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I would call the "vertical" attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the "horizontal" attack of drama, which is concerned with the development, let's say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling. Perhaps it would be made most clear if you take a Shakespearean work that combines the two movements. In Shakespeare, you have the drama moving forward on a "horizontal" plane of development, of one circumstance—one action—leading to another, and this delineates the character. Every once and a while, however, he arrives at a point of action where he wants to illuminate the meaning to this moment of drama, and, at that moment, he builds a pyramid or investigates it "vertically," if you will, so that you have a "horizontal" development with periodic "vertical" investigations, which are the poems, which are the monologues. Now if you consider it this way, then you can think of any kind of combination being possible. You can have operas where the "horizontal" development is virtually unimportant—the plots are very silly, but they serve as an excuse for stringing together a number of arias that are essentially lyric statements. Lieder are, in singing, comparable to the lyric poems, and you can see that all sorts of combinations would be possible.

It seems to me that in many films, very often in the opening passages, you get the camera establishing the mood, and, when it does that, cinematically, those sections are quite different from the rest of the film. You know, if it's establishing New York, you get a montage of images, that is, a poetic construct, after which what follows is a dramatic construct that is essentially "horizontal" in its development. The same thing would apply to the dream sequences. They occur at a moment when the intensification is carried out not by action but by the illumination of that moment. Now the short

films, to my mind (and they are short because it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time), are comparable to lyric poems, and they are completely a "vertical," or what I would call a poetic construct, and they are complete as such. One of the combinations that would be possible would be to have a film that is a dramatic construct, visually, accompanied by a commentary that is essentially poetic; that is, it illuminates the moments as they occur, so that you have a chain of moments developing, and each one of them is illuminated. It's things of this sort that, I believe, occur in the work of Mr. Maas, who has done that to a certain extent in his last film, *Image in the Snow*, where the development of the film is very largely "horizontal," that is, there is a story line, but this is illuminated constantly by the poetic commentary so that you have two actions going on simultaneously. Now this, I think, is one of the great potentials of film and something that could very well be carried and developed much further, and I think that one of the distinctions of that film and also of *Geography of the Body*, is that it combines these principles. I think that this is a way of handling poetry and film, and poetry in film . . . I don't know how the other people feel about it.

Maas: Well, Mr. Thomas, being a poet, what do you feel about it?

Thomas: Well, I'm sure that all Maya Deren said was what I would have said, had I thought of it or understood it (*laughter and slight applause*). I was asked, on the side, whether that meant that I thought that the audience didn't understand what Miss Deren was saying. I'm sure they did, and I wish I was down there. But it sounds different from that side, you know. Now I'm all for (I'm in the wrong place tonight) . . . I'm all for horizontal and vertical (*laughter*), and all for what we heard about in the avant-garde. The only avant-garde play I saw in New York was in a cellar, or a sewer, or somewhere (*laughter*). I happened to be with Mr. Miller over there. We saw this play going on . . . I'm sure it was fine. And, in the middle, he said, "Good God, this is avant-garde." He said, "In a moment, the hero's going to take his clothes off . . ."

Maas: Did he?

Thomas: He did. (*Laughter.*)

Maas: All to the good.

Thomas: But I don't know. I haven't a theory to my back, as they say. But there are, all through films that I've seen all my life . . . there have always been . . . bits that have seemed to me . . . Now, this is a bit of poetry. They might have been in the UFA films or something that I saw as a child. Or somebody coming

down some murderous dark, dark, silent street, apart from the piano playing. Or it might have been a little moment when Laurel and Hardy were failing to get a piano up or down a flight of stairs. That always seemed to me the poetry . . . when those moments came. Well, I have to go a step beyond those UFA films, now, to the non-silent films. In the best of those moments, the words seemed to fit. They were really the right words, even though the right word might only be a grunt. I'm not at all sure that I want such a thing, myself, as a poetic film. I think films, fine as they are, if only they were better! And I'm not quite sure that I want a new kind of film at all. While I'm recharging an almost empty mind with an almost empty battery, perhaps Mr. Miller would say something. (Applause.)

Maas: Well, I don't think I'll let it go at that, Mr. Thomas. Surely you must realize that the film is a popular medium, and you, more than anybody else, have tried to bring poetry to the public from the platform. Don't you think, in the popular art, in the way that the Elizabethan theater was a popular art, don't you think it would be possible in some way to weld poetry to the film? Do you think that it's just a verbal thing? That it would not be possible in the way that Elizabethan drama somehow welded language to the film?

Thomas: Well, just as a poem comes out . . . one image makes another in the ordinary dialectic process (somebody left out the word "dialectic," well I may as well bring it in, you know). So, as in a poem one image breeds another, I think, in a film, it's really the visual image that breeds another—breeds and breathes it. If it's possible to combine a verbal image to a visual image in this sort of horizontal way, I'd rather see horizontal films, myself. I like stories. You know, I like to see something going on (laughter and applause).

Maas: I shouldn't be saying anything; I'm the moderator. So, Mr. Miller, you talk about it.

Miller: Well, there've been about forty different ideas that have come across this table. It seems to me that to create a poetic film is, at bottom, the same problem as the drama presents when you contrast what is normally called naturalism with what is generally called a poetic drama. The only criticism I would have of such a discussion as this is that it is not tied to what anybody wishes to say. If I'm speaking to you now with a reasonable amount of confusion, I will sound confused, and I will speak in this tone of voice. If, on the other hand, I was clearly imbued with something very emotionally important to me, I would start speaking in a different rhythm. I would possibly use some images and so forth, so that to speak in

the blue without reference to our lives, without references really to the age in which we live, about this problem is an endless talk. Ah, that's the first place. On the question of technique, there's one obvious thing to me: The motion picture image is an overwhelming fact; it is different from any other experience we have in the arts because it is so much larger than we are. The possibility for the poet or the writer to tell a story or to transmit an emotion in their films, it seem to me, is contained within the image, so that I'm afraid, even though I'm much in sympathy with Willard's desire to join poetic speech with images, that, possibly, in the long run, it will be discovered to be a redundancy—that the poetry is in the film just as it is in the action of the play first. I was gratified to see that the poet's poet, T. S. Eliot, not long ago said as much, that, after pushing the drama around on his desk for many years, he had come to the conclusion that if the structure of the drama was not complete and beautiful, nothing he could do in the way of technical manipulation of words could get him out of the hole. I think, at bottom, that the structure of the film is the structure of the man's mind who made it, and if that is a mind that is striving for effect because it is striving for effect, the film will be empty, however interesting it happens to be on the surface. If it is a mind that has been able to organize its own experience, and if that experience is cohesive and of one piece, it will be a poetic film. Mr. Thomas has said, as (Mr. Tyler) has said, too, that the commercial film is full of poetic things because, at certain moments, in almost any poor structure, certain accidental qualities come into synchronization, so to speak, where, as in life sometimes, one needs only to drop a package of cigarettes, and the world explodes. Symbolic action is the point of all organization in the drama as well as in the film. To get back to the first proposition again . . . I think that it would be profitable to speak about the special nature of any film, of the fact of images unwinding off a machine. Until that's understood, and I don't know that it's understood (I have some theories about it myself), we can't begin to create, on a methodical basis, an aesthetic for that film. We don't understand the psychological meaning of images—any images—coming off a machine. There are basic problems, it seems to me, that could be discussed here. I've probably added no end to the confusion, but that's what I have to say at the moment. (Applause.)

Maas: Well, it seems to me that we have to start thinking about the image—the visual image and the verbal image. Can they be welded in some way?

Miller: I think that the basis for my remarks is perhaps almost

physiological. I think that the reason why it seems to many of us that the silent film is the purest film and the best is because it mimics the way we dream. We mostly dream silent, black and white. A few of us claim to dream in technicolor, but that's disputed by psychologists. It's sort of a boast: Certain people want to have more expensive dreams . . . I think that the film is the closest mechanical or aesthetic device that man has ever made to the structure of the dream. In a dream, montage is of the essence, as a superimposition of images in a dream is quite ordinary. The cutting in a dream is from symbolic point to symbolic point. No time is wasted. There is no fooling around between one important situation and the most important moment in the next situation. It seems to me that if we looked at the physiology of the film, so to speak, and the psychology of the film, the way it actually turns off the machine, we begin to get the whole question of style and the whole question of aesthetics changing when one sees it that way. In other words, sound in films and speech seem, perhaps, like the redundancy they so often are in films. I'll just leave it at that for the moment; maybe somebody else will have something to say about it.

*Maas:* Maya, I'm sure you have something to say about it.

*Deren:* If everyone will forgive me, Mr. Miller has made several references to "the way it comes out of the machine," he obviously hasn't made a film because first you have to put it in the machine, and that's awfully hard. It does begin before the machine. And it begins in the mind of the creator. And your reference to montage, and so on, is, if I may be permitted to return to my "vertical"—that is, the relationship between the images in dreams, in montage, and in poetry—is . . . they are related because they are held together by either an emotion or a meaning that they have in common, rather than by the logical action. In other words, it isn't that one action leads to another action (this is what I would call a "horizontal" development), but they are brought to a center, gathered up, and collected by the fact that they all refer to a common emotion, although the incidents themselves may be quite disparate. Whereas, in what is called a "horizontal" development, the logic is a logic of actions. In a "vertical" development, it is a logic of a central emotion or idea that attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core, which they have in common. This, to me, is the structure of poetry, so that, for example, you could have a dramatic development, in the sense of a "horizontal" development, for a while, as I said, in Shakespeare, and let us take the monologues where, in a poetic or a "vertical" structure, he brings

together all various images that relate to the feeling, let us say, of indecision. Now what I mean there by being essentially a "horizontal" development, is that it would have sufficed for Hamlet to say, "I can't make up my mind," and that's all, and that would not have affected the drama of the play, do you see? The poetic monologue there is, as it were, outside it or built upon it as a pyramid at that point as a means of intensifying that moment in the "horizontal" development. That is why film, I believe, lends itself particularly to the poetic statement, because it is essentially a montage and, therefore, seems by its very nature to be a poetic medium.

*Miller:* That's why I'm wondering whether the words are at all necessary, you see. Because the nature of the thing itself is so condensed. It would be like adding music to Hamlet's soliloquies.

*Deren:* May I answer that? The words are not necessary when they come, as in the theater, from what you see. You see, the way the words are used in films mostly derives from the theatrical tradition in which what you see makes the sound you hear. And so, in that sense, they would be redundant in film if they were used as a further projection from the image. However, if they were brought in on a different level, not issuing from the image, which should be complete in itself, but as another dimension relating to it, then it is the two things together that make the poem. It's almost as if you were standing at a window and looking out into the street, and there are children playing hopscotch. Well, that's your visual experience. Behind you, in the room, are women discussing hats or something, and that's your auditory experience. You stand at the place where these two come together by virtue of your presence. What relates these two moments is your position in relation to the two of them. They don't know about each other, and so you stand by the window and have a sense of afternoon, which is neither the children in the street nor the women talking behind you but a curious combination of both, and that is your resultant image, do you see? And this is possible in film because you can put a track on it.

*Miller:* I understand the process, but you see, in the drama there was a time, as you know, when action was quite rudimentary, and the drama consisted of a chorus which told the audience, in effect, what happened. Sometimes, it developed into a thespian coming forward and imitating action such as we understand action today. Gradually, the drama grew into a condition where the chorus fell away, and all of its comment was incorporated into the action. Now for good or ill, that was the development of the drama. I'm wonder-

ing now whether it's moot, whether it's to any point, to arrange a scenario so that it is necessary (and if it isn't necessary, of course it's aesthetically unwarranted) for words to be added to the organization of images, and whether that makes it more poetic. I don't think so. I can see the impulse behind it, but it seems to me that if it's a movie, it's a movie.

*Maas:* Well, doesn't it seem to have something to do with who is going to make this film? Is it going to be the man who has a poetical idea at the beginning, who then decides to work with a film director on this thing? Or is the poet going to work on it himself? Through words or through nothing, but just through a poetical idea, which is both visual and verbal at the same time? If he is going to work with a director, he is going to have to be terribly close to that director. He may as well be the same person. Then you have to have a poet who can also make a film.

*Thomas:* Oh, I think that's absolutely true—or you could work very closely with someone who knew film technique to carry it out. But I think the poet should establish a scenario and a commentary that would do that as well. And he may as well star in it as well.

*Maas:* Miss Deren has played in her own films, and I think she played in them because she couldn't get people to do the things that a director asks people to do unless they pay them ten thousand a week. I know that for myself, because I'm working on a new poetic film with Mr. Ben Moore, another poet; we found that he had to play the leading role because nobody would go through the trouble to do it. You see, you're not going to get commercial people to do this. What I am interested in at the moment is Mr. Miller's idea about film, and I'm afraid, Mr. Miller, that I think that you think that it must always be a drama. Then if it is a drama, is there not a difference between prose drama and poetic drama? There is certainly a difference between Shakespeare and even Ibsen. Don't you think so?

*Miller:* I wasn't thinking only of the drama. Of course, there have been poetic pictures made, as you know, which are silent. I suppose most of them, as a matter of fact, are not dramas. But my preference is toward drama because I'm primarily interested in action. It seems to me an aesthetic impurity to introduce words into a picture of any kind. I was against, as a whole, the idea of spoken pictures, anyway. It simply attests to the poverty of imagination of screenwriters that they need the words, and to the poverty of the imagination of the audience that it demands the words. I don't think that it has anything to do remotely with real films. The words came in

because the movies came after the theater, and the first people who moved into the movies were theater people, and the first commercially made films were, many of them, simply filmed plays. There's no relationship between the theater in that sense, and the films, for the simple reason I return to—a technical, physiological reason, and that is, that you're looking at an image many, many times larger than yourself, and that changes everything. It is a redundancy to add to that image, it seems to me. I just hope that your ambition to add words to film is not because you love words so much (which you should because you are a poet). I wouldn't want to interfere. I think that what you would say in words should be said instead in images.

*Maas:* Well, you must realize that there is a difference between Shakespeare and, let us say, any dramatist of repute. And there is a difference within poetic language, is there not?

*Miller:* There is, of course. The difference, however, is not of the same quality as the difference between words in a movie. The whole posture of the Elizabethan drama, so to speak, is larger than life as opposed to the modern drama, which is trying to be about the same size as life. Well, the movie starts out that way. It's almost impossible, as you know, to photograph reality in pictures and make it come out reality. I know that people have tried with cameras to destroy the . . . this leads to a humorous remark. I was involved with a director once who wanted to make pictures in New York that would look real. They photographed and photographed, and it ended up looking glamorous, no matter how deep down into the East Side they went. (*Laughter.*) They tried to dirty the film and do everything they could do to it. And I kept telling him that what was required was an organization of an idea to make this look like the East Side. My point is that, in the Elizabethan drama, it takes an effort of aesthetic will to raise life larger than it is on the stage. As soon as you point a camera at anything, it's no longer real.

*Maas:* Mr. Tyler, I don't want to answer this. You ought to say something. You must have been thinking a lot.

*Tyler:* We are snagged on the horns of a dilemma in a way, although I'm sure we've covered a lot of ground. I think one of the most interesting things is the shape and the character of these horns—that is, Miss Deren, who is a professional artist in the poetic film, started out by using a rather complex, a rather difficult, technical vocabulary in order to describe her theory about what she does. Now that's perfectly all right. But it struck Mr. Thomas as not precisely all right, and he then proceeded to talk about his very



spontaneous reactions to films in terms of what he thought was poetic in them, various little incidents, certain aspects, just points of emotion. And then Mr. Miller took over and started to talk about dreams and the pure medium of the film. Now the fact is that both these gentlemen—both of whom are professional writers, and one a professional poet—expressed the very view of life, the cinematic attitude toward life that Miss Deren and a number of other film-makers started out with and, in this primitive way, are simply reflecting, perhaps, the first stage of her development when she had the impulse to make poetic films—that is, to create meaningful images through the medium of moving photography. Now, it becomes the problem, especially here tonight, as to why she started out by using a very difficult vocabulary, a technical vocabulary, to express a sort of intellectual specialty in the way she regarded her art. As a matter of fact, the surrealists started out by excerpting parts of commercial films, jumbling them up, and making little poems out of them. It is simply a question of the editing, the montage, as Mr. Miller intelligently hinted a moment ago, a question of integrating a series of photographs, of spontaneous shots into a form, a shape, and then you have something. That is, you have a feeling about reality—which is what art is. So I think that the rudimentary ground is present; that is, poetic film means using the film as a conscious and exclusive means of creating ideas through images. As for poets and other artists collaborating with film-makers, the method of Eisenstein was one of strict collaboration in a technical sense. It was also one of literature in that he wrote out very elaborate, very detailed scripts, action for action, shot for shot, beforehand, and then, when he was in the field, since he was an artist, he remained open so that his technical advisors were always listened to. It was a question of using an original script, which was really literature, which was written as a starting point and, out of this kind of literature, creating a film. Certainly, among big film-makers and artists who created full length films, and films that were commercially distributed, Eisenstein was, in the history of films, the most conscious artist. So it seems to me just a little strange that Mr. Miller, in particular, being a dramatist, should take a purist point of view toward the film. I mean, that's his privilege, if he feels that way. But the hard part, at least to me, is that this is the way that the little film-makers, the poets of the film such as Miss Deren, feel—this is their approach to life. So now I don't know where we are! It's a question of what role literature, what role verbal poetry, should have in film. I don't know why Mr. Thomas and Mr. Miller

should insist, and I'm waiting to find out if they will insist, why poetry as literature should not, or cannot, collaborate with poetry as film.

*Deren:* I wish mainly to say that I'm a little bit flabbergasted at the fact that people who have handled words with such dexterity as Mr. Thomas and Mr. Miller and Mr. Tyler, should have difficulty with such a simple idea as the "vertical" and the "horizontal" (applause).

*Thomas: (aside)* Here we go up and down again.

*Deren:* These seem to me the most elementary movements in the world and really quite fundamental.

*Maas:* I don't think you ought to get vulgar.

*Deren:* That has really flabbergasted me to the extent that I am unable to develop the idea any further . . . I don't see anything so difficult in the notion that what I called a "horizontal" development is more or less of a narrative development, such as occurs in drama from action to action, and that a "vertical" development such as occurs in poetry, is a part of plunging down or a construction that is based on the intent of the moment, so that, for example, from a short story, one should be able to deduce the life of the hero before and after. In other words, the chosen moment should be of such significance that one can deduce all history from it. So, in a poem, in a way, from the emotion one can particularize to the incidents that might contain it, whereas in a drama, one generalizes the emotion from the particular instant. That is, the actions of the drama may not be personally known, but one generalizes the emotion that comes from it, and then it becomes possible to identify with it as a generalized emotion. I still don't know what's so difficult about those two differences, and I think I'd like to hear something from the floor myself.

*Miller:* Let me just say, I didn't intend to make it so difficult; it isn't. It's just not separate. There is no separation in my mind between a horizontal story and the plumbing of its meaning in depth. (Applause.)

*Maas:* Well, surely, Mr. Miller, you must see the difference between presenting something by words or dialogue, as you do and I do and Mr. Thomas does, and presenting something by the visual image. Now Ezra Pound said, in a definition of the image, that it is an emotional and intellectual complex caught in an instant of time. It's a very direct and quick way of saying things, a lyric way of saying things, whereas the way a dramatist says things is by putting the characters that speak back and forth in conflict. We know that

the sake of reaching outside the structure of the play to bring in some information. They are incorporated, completely wedded to the action. They *are* action. Now the only argument I have here at all, and the reason I have a feeling that verse, possibly, doesn't belong in the movies, is that if you have on the screen an image . . . an image is a bad word because it seems static . . . an action. Now it can be an action that is seemingly real or a fantastic one. And then, on top of it, you have an unseen narrator who is speaking—I'm afraid that the spoken word will be a kind of narrative, or lyrical, nondramatic verse. And that is going to stop the motion of the motion picture. And I'm against that. I think it's an intrusion on the medium. That's all I mean, I'm speaking for an organic art, that's all. (Applause.) . . . There's a good example in the making of the movie of *Death of a Salesman*. This was a very fascinating problem, and it is right to the point here. On the stage, it seemed perfectly all right to most people that the man should move into his memories which were evoked by the action in the present. I didn't like the script of the movie, and I quarreled very much with it. One would think, offhand, that it would be much easier in a movie to dissolve the present, because the very word dissolve is so natural to the camera and simply throws the man into the past. When the present was dissolved, the meaning of what happened in the past was less. And the reason for it was that, on stage, you had the present with you all the time. We couldn't remove the set. The man had his dreams in relation to the real set that he was standing on, so there was a tension involved. There was, in other words, a reproduction of reality, because when we talk to ourselves on the street, the street is still there, and we don't vanish in thin air. But, in the movie, they made the terrible mistake of evaporating his surroundings, so that he was thrust completely into his dream. And what happened was: It became a narrative. The conflict was that this man—after all, it's not quite as bad to talk to yourself when you're alone in the desert as it is when you're standing in front of a girl at Macy's counter—that has an entirely different meaning. In one case, the man can be quite balanced; in the other case, he begins to look as though he's losing his balance. This, to my mind, is an analogy between anything that stops action, that is bad in a picture. I think, in the movie of *Death of a Salesman*, the action was stopped because the visual thing that kept the tension of those memories was evaporated. And I'm afraid that the same thing would happen with speech in a picture.

## ON THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE EXPERIMENTAL (POETIC) FILM

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WITH GIDEON BACHMAN,  
AMOS VOGEL, PARKER TYLER,  
IAN HUGO, LEWIS JACOBS.

Gideon Bachmann: As a proper introduction to our discussion, could you, Mr. Tyler, define the nature of the experimental film—how does it differ from the so-called commercial film?

Parker Tyler: Personally, in examining the differences between experimental and commercial films, I would emphasize the originality of a great number of the avantgarde or, as they are often called, experimental film-makers. In the Twenties, there came into being the art of "cineplastics," a term which is to be credited to the French art critic Elie Faure. The principles of cineplastics imply that the film while it must inevitably depend upon other arts for some of its characteristics (painting because of the four-sided frame; theater because of the spoken word; the novel because of the narrative line), should at the same time concentrate on a *sense of film* as a particular and individual form. And this sense of the film as a particular and individual form and, above all, as a medium which creates in terms of imagery—in other words, in basically poetic terms—this has been kept alive, I think, entirely by the spirit of the avantgarde film.

Gideon Bachmann: You pointed out that cinema inevitably derives in part from other arts. I always felt very strongly that it is a medium of artistic expression very much in its own right; therefore, I wish you would elaborate a little more on that statement of yours.

Parker Tyler: I believe that the arts are ultimately inseparable. At bottom, each one is an expression of the imagination. Take music, for example. We, sometimes, in the modern manner, try to understand music as a pure form, as nothing but sound and as not expressive of human emotions, of human situations. On the other hand, from time immemorial, from the very beginning of history, music has expressed human emotions, human aspirations, human situations—in short: drama. I think that even the most abstract music expresses human emotions. Indeed, all art is an expression of human emotion, whether it is in the kinetic visual terms of stage and screen or in the kinetic auditory terms of music. But the peculiar faculty of film-as-movement is conditioned by the notion that movement is not infinite in space. It is limited in space, or it hasn't any meaning. If it doesn't have a *beginning* and an *end*, we cannot understand it. And this *beginning* and *end*, in a sense, are represented by the four-sided frame of the motion picture screen. In other words, the individual frame of the film expresses the same thing that a painting expresses by having four sides.

Gideon Bachmann: Then, when you say that film has a point of departure in common with other arts, you are referring to that complex of human situations with which all arts deal—drama, as you termed it.

Parker Tyler: That's true. That is one basic consideration. Then, too, there is the avantgarde film-maker's attention to the light-and-shade elements of composition and to the potentialities of various distortional techniques in producing emotional effects comparable to those found in abstract and expressionist paintings, respectively.

Ian Hugo: Since I was a graphic artist myself before I started film-making, my personal experience directly applies to what Mr. Tyler has said about the relationship between these arts. My interest was in *line*. I was an etcher and engraver, and my engravings were often described as musical in their movement. And certainly that was my own feeling about them. I was always trying to make the line move. My last engravings were pretty well trying to move right out of the frame. When I came to film-making, I found that this interest in line was still with me. The visual continuity of the film was the same line that I was using in engraving. The fulfillment of one and the same basic impulse has guided me in both arts.

#### EXPERIMENTAL FILM AS A CONTEMPORARY ART

Amos Vogel: An important point to be made in this connection is that, historically, the avantgarde movement in films was closely tied to the revolution that occurred in art in the early part of the century—what we have come to call modern or contemporary art. And now, as we all

know, representational art is no longer dominant. In fact, it has been superseded. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in the commercial cinema "realism" is still—we must use this term—triumphant. There is no room, or hardly any room, in the commercial cinema for the type of artistic expression whose ascent we have witnessed in modern literature, painting, music and poetry. And I think it is very significant that most of the films made by independent experimenters have moved precisely along the lines which modern art has followed. For example, there are essentially two main types of experimental films: abstract films, which treat the world of objects, and films of the dream world, which attempt to explore the subconscious. Here, too, we see the close tie-up with current developments in modern art, as we encounter surrealist, expressionist, poetic, symbolic films of various types. None of these films can be described as truly being in the "realist" tradition.

Gideon Bachmann: Has this correspondence with the evolution of modern art been true of the entire history of the experimental film?

Amos Vogel: Yes. One critic has remarked that commercial cinema today is more or less on the level of the nineteenth century painting; what the independent and avantgarde film-makers are attempting to do is to create the same type of art in cinema that exists in the other art media at the present moment. Many of them may be fumbling and many of them, certainly, are only beginning their work, but at least they are making the attempt.

#### EXPERIMENTS: FORM OR CONTEST?

Gideon Bachmann: It would be interesting to find out whether experimentation is continuing on all levels of film-making—sound, for instance, which since 1928 has become an important aspect of film production.

Lewis Jacobs: I want to make a distinction here with regard to something that came up in Mr. Vogel's remarks and which might help answer this question. Many of the early experiments and many of today's experiments are primarily concerned with novel or unique content and visual devices. But these two concerns, important as they are, fool many people into praising such "experimental" films far beyond their due. It is important for the film experimenter to explore both content and form. Some of them have begun to conceive new content but, on the whole, they have failed to search for new forms of expression. Too few have felt challenged to strike out for formal marriages of content and structure, for personal, distinctive and imaginative constructions in which form and

content reinforce each other.

In order for a film to have some value *in terms of film*, there must be some kind of personal formal organization. By that I mean a cinematic expression achieved through filmic means (imagery, movement, time, space, sound and color) and mode of composition (the organic relationships of these means). Today it is common for modern painters to distort content and concentrate on organic form. Despite this emphasis, experimental film-makers have been slow to grasp and deal with the formal aspects of movies. Too often they strive for striking surface effects, assuming that such effects give their works significance. An outstanding example can be seen in the kaleidoscopic and distorted-lens films of Weegee: startling imagery, but no structure.

We all remember the great emphasis the early Russian film-makers gave to formal problems; and how indebted they were to Griffith's instinctive formal discoveries. (And how exciting those films were.) But those who came later—the "cinéastes" and the "documentarists"—fell in love with devices and so became mannered, or discovered nature in the raw (or in the slums) and became cultist.

Well, the coming of sound—to get back to Gideon's question—killed all concern for form. Dialogue took the art out of motion pictures. Today, however, dialogue is gradually being recognized as only one of the many aspects of sound, not necessarily the most important. More and more, attempts are being made to regulate and integrate it with the other plastic elements of formal expression.

Parker Tyler: I am not sure that I agree with Mr. Jacobs. Maybe I am not sure that I understand him. It seems to me that in the experimental film-maker's shifting of concentration from the objective, everyday, naturalistic world to an inner world—one of dream and fantasy, primarily—there was not only a changed focus of content, but also a changed focus of form. Such classic experimental films as the *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Cocteau's film *Blood of a Poet* and the Dali-Bunuel film *Andalusian Dog* realized very definitely and sharply that there were certain implications in the shift to this inner and subjective world—formal things which they carried through very thoroughly. For example, the aspect of the object in dreams and the way the object moves, the way the human being moves, the way we see objects—all these are different in a state of dream and in a state of intense subjectivity or hallucination. And therefore objects do appear—in these classic films, films which have been imitated and emulated since then—objects do appear in a very different way, in a different form. They look differently and they behave differently, especially when they are human beings. That is, the image as such, whether a human being or an object, is thoroughly transformed and seems

to exist in a special world and to belong in that world. And along such channels of formal experimentation, I think, a great deal of headway has been made. If we drew up a list of films which explored various aspects of what I would call artistic transformation in correspondence with the ways objects have been transformed in cubist, expressionist, futurist, or surrealist art, the list would be a long one. We might even describe for each film and each film-maker on the list the particular ways (and their particular degrees of success) which have been explored in the very field that Mr. Jacobs feels has been neglected—that of formal or, I should say, artistic experimentation.

Ian Hugo: I feel that, as a film-maker, I can confirm more what Mr. Jacobs was saying than what Mr. Tyler said, though there is perhaps not such a big distance between them. Both as a graphic artist and as a film-maker I have often been asked the question "How do you get your ideas?" And I have also tried to ask myself that question. As near as I can come to it, my answer is that, in the graphic arts, in etching and engraving, it was through explorations of how steel could cut copper and how the acid would work on it. My explorations in film-making have been of a very similar kind. I have never written any script. My scripts are made with the camera itself and in accidental discoveries that set off my ideas and my inspiration. It seems to me rather fundamental that the work of art should grow out of the materials themselves. And I think that is what Mr. Jacobs meant when he said that there has been insufficient emphasis on form and too much on content.

#### CONTENT AND PLOT

Amos Vogel: Since experimental films are often accused of lacking content, we might profitably consider the use of this term "content." For example, in the commercial film—since it is strictly representational—"content" consists of a plot that usually proceeds in a straight line from A to B. We know what happens at the beginning of the film and we know what happens during the film. Then we have the happy ending, and that's it. Now, an experimental film-maker is interested in the atmosphere, interested in the linear progression from A to B: he is much more interested in what happens *between* A and B. The experimental film-maker is interested in the atmosphere, he is interested in a state of mind or in an emotion, and any one of these in itself constitutes the content of his film. In this sense, I think, it is important to stress the definitional differences involved here—any film dealing with the so-called inner world, with the world of the subconscious or dreams or fantasy, has "content" and yet does not require a

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plot in the way a representational or "realistic" film needs one.

Lewis Jacobs: I think, if I may say so, that we are confusing content with plot. Content does not necessarily mean plot and it never means story. Content is simply the raw material of life or imagination and can be anything in the present or past. Content can deal with the inner world or outer world or both worlds, or even the science-fiction world of the comic strip artist. Regardless of what the content is, it is the film-maker's job—whether he is an experimental or a commercial film-maker—to make that content as cinematically effective and as deeply moving to the beholder as he possibly can. And the only way he can do both these things is through a command of his filmic means of expression and his mode of composition.

Gideon Bachmann: I feel that every artist—whether he is a painter, a sculptor, or a film-maker—should know what he is doing at all times, should be in full command of his technique. It is difficult to visualize an artist in the process of creation who is only finding out what he's trying to say while he's saying it. Traditionally one is more inclined to think of the artist as a man with an idea seeking an idea to express. But, of course, it is also generally accepted that the process of work in itself can provide formal stimuli. What it boils down to, then, is that an artist should at least have a clear idea of the essence of what he wants to express in the Platonic sense. Then the formal realization on film (or on canvas) is "good" inasmuch as it expresses the "—ishness" of his idea, in the same manner that Plato discussed the "tableness" of a table.

Lewis Jacobs: There is a big difference between technique and form. There are many so-called masters of technique who know nothing at all about form. They are very good technicians. They know how to use the tools and instruments of cinema. They know how to take a close-up and how to dolly and pan and how to edit shots together for a "smooth continuity." But they have no concept of film form. Concerned as they are with the mechanics of film-making and interested solely in the novelty of the subject matter and its narrative, dramatic, or documentary aspects, they are for the most part unaware of (some even disdain) the dynamics and interrelationships of a film's formal possibilities. As I understand it, form is a different thing from simple technique. Hollywood, for instance, has masterful technicians, slick, glossy artisans of all kinds—but few real artists. For all artists, regardless of their medium, are concerned primarily with form. They set up relations and unities which they juggle and keep re-relating. Under such manipulation, content changes; forms emerge. Balancing one against the other, juggling relationships, always striving for a unity that is deeply expressive and deeply personal—these are the aims of the serious film-maker.

Ian Hugo: This process of filmic creation which you have just described reminds me of something. When Einstein was asked "How do you get your ideas?" he said, "I play with images." Well, an important part of the work of a creative film-maker consists of playing with his materials, with his camera, and, as I said, accidents come out of that playing. Sometimes these are magical accidents and if the film-maker is open, alert and sensitive enough, they may inspire him and germinate in him original forms and new ideas. But then comes the second step, which every artist must take: the integration of what he has found in that magical way through his material, through tinkering around with his tools. From that point on, if true form is to be achieved, in Mr. Jacobs' sense of "relationships in unity," the film-maker must integrate two things: his depth mind and his surface mind, his emotions and his reason.

Parker Tyler: Without going deeper into a morass of technicalities, I think that we do have to draw the distinction, which Mr. Vogel pointed out, between the representational world of commercial film and the non-representational world of avantgarde film. Regardless of how successful young film poets are—most of them are serious but, also, most of them have not made many successful films—they are all aware of the nature of the problem, and that is this: if film is to become an important art, it has to explore the world of the imagination and the ways in which imagination from time immemorial has operated upon the natural world in terms of visual understanding. Back in the paleolithic era, before civilization, the artists of Altamira drew animals, but these animals were not photographic or naturalistic in form. They drew the animals as they saw them. And the way they drew the animals was, in a sense, expressionistic or formalistic. At the same time, the content was very important because it was religious, it was ritualistic. These images are very beautiful and very interpretative of the human spirit through the animal form. They are highly formalistic. Now, it seems to me that this principle of form creating art—a process of taking a given material, a subject matter, educating an idea from it, and presenting this idea in a distinctive and stylized way—it seems to me that this is simply grasping the most fundamental principle of art. And, as I said at the beginning of this symposium, it is the experimental, avantgarde school which keeps alive an interest in this principle, as it relates to cinema, and draws inspiration from it.

#### WHAT DOES THE EXPERIMENTAL FILM GIVE TO ITS AUDIENCE?

Gideon Bachmann: The experimental film artist, in order to function, needs the support of an audience. There must be people who will

pay to see his films; otherwise, he cannot continue making them. From the point of view of the lay audience, certain basic questions arise, however. What can the experimental film give me? What can the experimental film do for me? In other words, what is there in experimental films which makes it worthwhile for audiences to go and see them? What is the justification for them?

Amos Vogel: The audiences that come to see these films are confronted with one severe handicap. These audiences—and film society audiences are hardly exceptions—in the past have only been exposed to the representational type of cinema exhibited at their commercial neighborhood movie houses. As a result, they are not quite prepared to face and to appreciate experimental films. Hans Richter once put this very well when he said that the average spectator, going to a neighborhood movie house, expects to have fried chicken fly into his mouth without any work on his part. What he is saying, of course, is that when we are watching commercial cinema, we remain passive spectators. Everything is carefully spelled out and we are not called upon to experience what we experience when encountering a piece of serious music or a painting, especially a modern painting, which very definitely calls for an active spectator—a person willing to be involved, willing, you might say, to work for his money. Now, as to the justification for these films: I venture to say that future sociologists will find more information about what it felt like to live in the middle of the twentieth century by looking at these so-called esoteric and “precious” experimental films than they would from looking at the prefabricated, cut-and-dried documentaries to which we are so often exposed. In experimental films, we have a clear picture of a society in transition, a society faced with crisis, war, alienation of the individual, problems of standardization and mechanization. In all these respects, the experimental films—whether the individual artists are aware of it or not—express the tensions and the discomfort felt by their makers in our present-day society. Experimental films have always had a definite and deep social significance: recall that the avantgarde movement started in Europe just after the First World War, at a time of social upheaval. I think that the world-view of the experimental film-maker is something to be kept in mind at all times when we view these films. The people who make them are profoundly discontented. They are not “adjusted” to present-day society and they express the tensions and problems of this society in no uncertain terms.

Gideon Bachmann: Basically, then, you have said that it is the social complexities operating upon or pressing upon the people who make these films, who find themselves profoundly unable to cope with the current human condition, that impart significance to the experimental film. Now,

Mr. Hugo, since you apparently have a more individual approach to their creation, do you feel that experimental films need no wider, social significance?

Ian Hugo: I think they have a very wide social significance, and precisely because of the approach which many of us have to the art—the individual approach. I believe that through the individual approach you will arrive at an integration with other human beings. Vittorio de Sica has said that the essence of today's drama is man's inability to communicate with his fellow man. I believe the reason for this failure of communication is that most attempts of communication have been made through the surface mind. We have come to distrust all surface communications because we have seen how deceptive they can be. Now, some modern writers, painters and many jazz musicians have succeeded in reestablishing communication in depth—under the surface and through the subconscious. When film-makers discover the true language of the film medium, as only a few have begun to do, and succeed in expressing themselves as *film artists* in that universal language, the film will become the most potent means of communication among human beings.

Parker Tyler: I would like to add to the proposed *raison d'être* of the experimental film by remarking—in regard to the question of the artist or, rather let's say, the individual not communicating with his fellow man or with society in general that the avantgarde film-maker or the avantgarde artist in any medium displays a kind of individual courage in being able to go into himself, to go into the depths where (if we are to believe James Joyce) all society is again rejoined and becomes one, or, as Joyce calls it, “the night mind.” There are many other names for it: Freud, for example, calls it the unconscious. The particular kind of courage displayed by the experimental film-maker, I think, makes him a very worthwhile object of support and, in view of his condition of simple mechanical needs, perhaps all questions of form and content become rather academic. He has a fund of courage in him, based on—to put it very simply—imagination. And imagination, really human imagination, is what makes the world go round. It's what enables us to visualize the future. It's what enables us to visualize in ourselves our deepest human motives. And in his effort to create a world of vision which has character and which has drive, which has depth, the experimental film-maker is doing his best to—well, I will put it simply again—make the world go round.

WHERE CAN EXPERIMENTAL FILMS BE SEEN?

Gideon Bachmann: I think what all of you have been trying to say

is that the experimental film—more than the Hollywood film, and in the manner of the modern painter or the modern sculptor—expresses the complexities of the human situation and makes it easier or, maybe, makes it possible for less-universally conscious people in the audience to find some mirror of their own difficulties, of their own troubles, of their own existence. And, this, perhaps, most significantly defines the universal meaning of the experimental film. Now, Mr. Vogel, as one who has been closely associated with the distribution and exhibition of these films, could you tell us where experimental films can be seen?

Amos Vogel: By and large, these films can be seen only in the so-called non-theatrical outlets, primarily in film societies of which there are several hundred throughout the country. In addition, there are many art museums, civic groups, labor unions, churches, etc. The films are distributed through several sources, Cinema 16 being one\*, which in the last five years has rented films of this type to more than 400 outlets. In these small but growing organizations, audiences—often for the first time—have an opportunity to become acquainted with experimental films.

Gideon Bachmann: Perhaps some of you would like to say a few words to end the discussion and to give a short review of your opinions on this entire movement?

Amos Vogel: I just want to come back to one point made before. What does the average moviegoer "get out" of seeing experimental films? Having seen practically all the experimental films made in America and abroad in the last six or seven years, I find it easy to categorize them in very definite ways for they deal with very specific themes, although they may treat these themes in an oblique and unorthodox fashion. For example, I could list at least ten to fifteen films that in various ways attempt to deal with the whole question of war and there are at least ten or twenty that deal with problems of emotional or sexual adjustment. When you begin to look at these films more specifically, you realize how they tie in with the human condition at every point and how they are not at all frivolous or esoteric. If we approach them as we approach all of art, literature, poetry or music, if we approach them with an open mind searching for an experience, then we can get a great deal out of them.

Parker Tyler: Two things have been brought out by all the participants in this symposium—first, that the experimental film is a subject or, rather I should say, a kind of activity about which people can agree and disagree deeply, and this, it seems to me, proves the vitality of experimental films; and second, that in so far as modern problems are concerned, or what has been called the human condition, the experimental film is an inward-going kind of activity and it seems to me that, by this going inward, the outward human condition is profoundly illuminated.

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